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ABSTRACT

Established in 1984, the twofold purpose of the national award-winning Keystone Writing Project of the Fort Worth Independent School District is to (1) create a staff development program to assist teachers in designing strategies for teaching writing; and (2) to set up a district writing program that meets the needs of all students. During the 1991-1992 academic year six graduate English students began working in different elementary classrooms as "writing consultants" bringing collaborative writing theory to elementary teachers through in-class practice. Consultants help teachers find ways to turn the responsibility for learning back to students on the assumption that there is a correlation between loss of control, loss of incentive, and the 50% drop-out rate in the Fort Worth Independent School District. Enthusiasm for the project is tempered by a warning against the reification of collaboration into a set of prescriptions. Successful primary writing instruction ultimately depends on reform in teacher education. (Author/RS)

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Serving as the Keystone:
Collaborative Reform, Relinquishing Authority, and the Link to Higher Education in the Fort Worth Public Schools

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Abstract

Graduate English students work as "writing consultants" bringing collaborative writing theory to elementary teachers through in-class practice. Consultants help teachers find ways to turn the responsibility for learning back to students on the assumption that there is a correlation between loss of control, loss of incentive, and the 50 percent drop-out rate in the Fort Worth ISD. Enthusiasm for the project is tempered by a warning against the reification of collaboration into a set of prescriptions. Successful primary writing instruction ultimately depends on reform in teacher education.

Serving as the Keystone: Collaborative Reform, Relinquishing Authority, and the Link to Higher Education in the Fort Worth Public Schools

> Who shall be the "authorities" in our writing classes? (Just ask yourself: who are the "authors"? Must it be so hard to say, "Our students"?)--James Baumlin and Jim Corder

> At the center, a dark star
> wrapped in white.
> When you bite, listen
> for the crunch of boots on snow,
> snow that has ripened. Over it
> stretches the red, starry sky.
>
> ("Apple" by Nan Fry)

After she reads this verse, poet Aileen Murphy sits cross-legged on the floor with the fourth graders in Mrs. Brown's class, letting the message sink in. They eye her expectantly. Some of them are straining forward, trying to get as close to her as they can. Their small faces, eyebrows raised, wait for the poet to continue. On a signal from Murphy a small girl sitting in front holds up an apple for everyone to examine. Severed into halves, the apple reveals in its heart the concrete imagery of the poem: the dark star, the ripe white, the crunch it makes as a volunteer bites into it. The children lean even closer, gasping in recognition. A transformation has taken place before their eyes.

This is the kind of interaction that takes young writers into the world of poets, a sharing process that is made possible by the establishment of the Fort Worth Independent School District's Keystone Writing Project. Recognized in 1989 by the National Council of Teachers of English as one of its "Centers of Excellence in English and Language Arts," and one of ten programs in the nation to receive the National Council of States Inservice Education "Showcase of Excellence Award," the Keystone Writing Project, directed by Sally Hampton, is the only member of the National Writing Project that is not based on a college campus, but, rather, in a public school district (Keystone, p. 12).

Established in 1984, Keystone's purpose is twofold:

> 1) to create a staff development program to assist teachers in designing strategies for teaching writing; and 2) to set up a district writing program that meets the needs of all students. (Keystone, p. 9)

Funded by a grant from the Sid Richardson Foundation of Fort Worth, the Keystone Writing Project provides in its staff development program teacher/researcher opportunities by incorporating current theory and research with pedagogy. "The project is committed to the concept that since research must inform practice, teachers must be given adequate time to read and discuss research and to establish classroom research projects of their own." The aim is to empower teachers, making it possible for them to shape the future. Informed by theory,

teachers become "change agents" who workshop with peers to improve classroom procedures (Keystone, p. 2).

Before the establishment of the Keystone Project, Fort Worth teachers, like most of those turned out by American colleges of education through the 1960s and 70s, were unable to make distinctions between rhetoric and prescriptive grammar, and their pedagogies reflected it. According to Hampton, knowledge of the revolution in composition research and theory that sought to elevate process over product was conspicuously absent. "When I came here there was no writing taught at the elementary schools--it was basically reading and grammar, spelling and handwriting." Based in an urban school district, in a state with the second highest drop-out rate and the highest illiteracy rate in the nation, the Keystone Project, under Hampton's direction, began by concentrating on elementary classrooms in schools scoring the lowest in state-wide testing:

> I would think it would be challenging as an intellectual exercise: what do you do to keep these kids in school? . . . . Rather than go in at the upper levels I decided to go into elementary and change--build a foundation so that as kids came up through the system they'd come up with a background in writing.

Six years later, Hampton feels that a structure that will support discussion about rhetorical aims exists in many Fort Worth ISD classrooms. What Hampton calls a "process-centered, student-centered" language arts pedagogy is now "basically district policy K-5."

On the principle that "learning is a social act that occurs best where there is freedom to collaborate and share information and skills" (Hampton, 1990a, p. 1), the school district affords teachers released time during the academic year to attend writing workshops on the improvement of student writing. In an effort to dispel the "if-I-don't-teach-it-they-won't-learn-it" approach to writing instruction, teachers work together to understand process theory, methods of conferring about student writing, and differing patterns of learning.

As a member of the National Writing Project, Keystone has a history of employing theorists and researchers for "summer institutes" and workshops that provide an "opportunity for teachers to work with their peers in an environment that is both literate and enabling" (Keystone, p. 5). Yet in her most recent visit to observe the progress of the NWP program in New York, Hampton was amazed at an increased vitality resulting from teachers working in groups with writers themselves--discussing literature and how that literature is generated. In an effort to emulate that success, Hampton sought "struggling" writers who could relate their attempts to generate text without intimidating teachers or children; she turned to the English department at Texas Christian University. This academic year six creative writers/teachers from TCU are each working with individual elementary teachers and their classes, helping to infuse the Fort Worth Independent School District with differing perspectives on social approaches to

the teaching of writing. Aileen Murphy is one of these "Writing Consultants."1

On the day that Murphy visits Brown's class, one child, Michael, scores what Robert Frost might have called "a little victory":

> Jonny drew a monster
> the monster chased him
> Just in time Jonny erased
> Him.

The visiting writer worked with Michael on line division and is especially eager to see what he will write next. The lesson with Michael went particularly well, she thinks. "Perhaps you would like to do a mini-lesson on line division to follow up today's drafting," she suggests to Brown who nods in agreement.

Together, poet and teacher engage in a social interaction central to the instructional process. Interaction between writers and teachers serves to empower teachers to create an environment that will allow students to develop as writers while they develop as teachers of writing. Avoiding the double standard that often inheres in academic situations, the Keystone Project insists that a transactional approach to learning extend to students as well as teachers. Instead of students being subjugated to a passive receiver role in the classroom, they become involved in sharing knowledge through a whole-language approach which does not privilege the literate over the oral, or one learning style over another.

Working together, teaching each other, teachers in the Keystone Writing Project enable each other to bring a

collaborative writing process into the classroom. The Writing Program of the Keystone Project reflects the process-centered pedagogy of Columbia University's Dr. Lucy Calkins. For Calkins, the writing process "does not begin with jotted notes or rough drafts but rather with relationships within a community of learners" (1986, p. ix). According to Hampton, adopting Calkin's approach to a collaborative pedagogy anticipates the inferences teachers might make from examining the supporting instructional materials. Unlike much of the teacher-training literature Keystone considered, Calkins' approach reflects success with predominately black and hispanic inner city classrooms--a racial and socio-economic make-up similar to many of the buildings in the Fort Worth Independent School District.

The practical application of Calkins' theoretical approach can be seen in Mrs. Sellers' class at a north-side elementary. Students generate ideas through a variety of inventive strategies, create drafts of assignments, then share those drafts with each other. Working in "response groups," students tell each other what they like about each others' writing as well as what's confusing. Brightly colored mobiles hang around the room, reminding students that while they're doing "red" work (drafting and revision) they can avoid the "blue" work (editing for superficial correctness). At the back of the room, on the cold patterned tile of the gray portable building, Jerry has just read his story about a trip to see his grandmother.

"Up here," his response group partner Lisa says, "you wrote that it is raining, but here you say it's a beautiful day. Are you at home or at your grandmother's house in Dallas when the story starts?"

Jerry is quick to realize the unintended contradiction his responder has identified. "I see what I need to do," he nods as he heads back to his desk to revise. When Jerry decides with the help of another group of writers that his story is finished, he'll take it to an editing group where still other classmates will help him edit the paper for matters of style.

When Jerry's story is finished, it will be bound in a booklet with the stories of his classmates and distributed to other students in his school. This notion of "publishing" much of what students write is meant to provide a sense of fulfillment to the writing process. Students are encouraged to see that their writing can have consequences beyond the trash can or the refrigerator door.

What is most significant about the process of drafting and revising described above is that it had nothing to do with Jerry's teacher. Although Mrs. Sellers remained available to Jerry during this drafting period, he was under no obligation to have his work reviewed or evaluated by her. In this "student-centered" environment, Jerry is able to have his work read by his peers, other actively engaged writers similar in experience and ability. During this early stage of drafting and revision, Jerry is free from the imposition of what Brannon and Knoblauch call the teacher's "Ideal Text" (1982, p. 159).

He is able to experiment with his intentions unencumbered by the teacher's conception of what might make a "good" trip-to-see-grandma story. While no one would doubt that most teacher intervention in student writing is done with the best of intentions, this intervention can serve to appropriate students' texts rather than facilitate the development of their own ideas, to "show students that the teacher's agenda is more important than their own, that what they wanted to say is less relevant than the teacher's impression of what they should have said" (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982, p. 158). When students begin to abandon their ideas in favor of what they think teachers want, they abandon control of their own expression. It's not unlikely, as Brannon and Knoblauch contend, that there is a correlation between a loss of control and a loss of incentive to write (1982, p. 159). Mere common sense dictates that there is a dependent relationship between incentive and improvement.

The adoption of a collaborative learning environment can be seen as a direct attempt on the part of the Keystone Project to return control of student writing to the students: to foster the incentive necessary not only for improvement, but in the high drop-out, inner-city buildings, an attempt to provide incentive to stay in school. How many of us would choose to remain active and involved in situations where we are not given the opportunity to express our own ideas in our own ways?

Asking students to interact with each other, "to become more actively involved in their own learning" (Hampton, 1988, p. 12), does not lead to the devaluation of the teacher.

It leads to a redefinition of a teacher's responsibilities. Keystone teachers are asked to "provide a classroom atmosphere where children write freely and frequently without self-consciousness [and to] help children develop a strong sense of authorship and a sense of community among other students/writers" (Hampton, 1988, p. 3).

Relinquishing authority is often very difficult for classroom teachers who have been trained in traditional pedagogy. For the student, accepting authority is often just as difficult. If the teacher isn't up in front of the classroom, is learning going on? In a Keystone classroom, where collaboration becomes central to learning and to the fabric of the writing classroom management system, authority in its most basic sense belongs to the author. Keystone teachers facilitate an environment whereby students can make informed choices rather than take direction. James Baumlin and Jim Corder remind us that

> the Latin **auctoritas** [authority] derives ultimately from the verb **augere**, to make or cause to grow, to originate. Far from a restraining, defining, or limiting force, **auctoritas** thus means in its primary sense **production, invention, cause** . . . the author is the **founder**, then, the **producer**, the **originator**, the **augmentor**, and her "authority," her creative power, becomes freedom itself--the freedom (and freedom is power) to speak and write. (1990, p. 19)

In order for the author to maintain authority, teachers need to avoid explicit, channeling questions or remarks when conferring with students about their texts.

Jonathan has written a poem. He is busy drawing a picture at the bottom of his paper to illustrate it. He doesn't look like he wants to share the poem until it is finished. The moment he finishes his drawing, he grins up at the consultant-poet, Shelley Aley, and asks her if she would like to read his poem. She begins to read it aloud.

a monster
that feeds on
backpacks
it has a small
silver toung
when he's sleepy
or full he's quiet
but when he's hungry
he'll slam his mouth
up and down
making a terrible
noise so I feed him
and he'll go back
to sleep
my locker

"That's really good, Jonathan," Aley replies. "What made you think of your locker today?"

In her book, For the Good of the Earth and the Sun: Teaching Poetry, Georgia Heard would call Aley's inquiry a "big question." Heard writes, "What has encouraged me is not questions about this line or this word or vague, generalized praise, it's the big things . . . the sense of being listened to and understood. This is the crucial element in responding to anyone's poetry" (1989, p. 38).

After seven years of working with the Teacher's College Writing Project in New York and serving as a consultant to other writing projects, including Keystone, Heard has learned the power of listening which she describes as a "magnetic force" between writer and listener. Through listening, she draws out a "re-vision," a "reexperience" of the author's original image (1989, pp. 38, 42). Using William Stafford's metaphor, Heard demonstrates that she is the follower in a dance. The student-poet leads. In conferring, she tries to be honest while not taking over, not becoming the leader, not becoming the authority in the student's poem (1989, 39). It is important for the poet-consultant to demonstrate respect for Jonathan's feelings about his work. She may want to pursue the image in the poem further. Much of what decides her actions will depend on how the student leads in this session.

Aley, in conferring with them, depends on what the children tell her. In the classroom, one girl has written a poem about clouds. Conferring with the student-poet reveals

what the child knows about poems: sometimes they rhyme. However, while conferring, Aley realizes that the girl believes she **must** make her poem rhyme. Conferring helps to uncover misconceptions the child has about writing. When is a story a story, and a poem a poem? When should lines in a poem break? These are some of the confusions that can be discussed in a conference between the child and the consultant or teacher. Conferring also keeps the teacher and consultant up to date on the progress the student is making. A mini-lesson on how poems don't always rhyme would be valuable for this girl, and probably for some of the other children as well. The teacher may decide to do a mini-lesson, or she may decide to ask Aley to present the concept in class the next time she visits. Over time, conferring may lead to the internalization of the inquisitive reader or listener, where the student herself moves from asking surface questions about individual poems to "big questions" about her own writing process.2

In "Writing as Collaboration," James Reither and Douglas Vipond assert that many attempts at collaborative, student-centered pedagogy have ended in failure because they have simply been grafted onto traditional approaches (1989, pp. 855-56). Although the Keystone Project has reconceived and redesigned the method of writing instruction in the Fort Worth ISD, the specter of "prescription" looms large. Anyone who has tried to encourage students to think for themselves knows how readily they perceive questions and suggestions as specific directives. By the time children begin to write, they have

taken in no less than a life-time of prescriptive commands from adults. It is no wonder that students frequently turn their teachers' best efforts at stimulating thought into **de facto** instructions. Teachers must be aware that the best environment for learning how to write is one in which the teacher is not the center of authority. At the same time, authority is often the teacher's responsibility when charged with students' care. Expecting students to understand the difference between the directives necessary on the playground or during arithmetic and facilitative comment during language arts demands a great deal of support.

Additionally, Knoblauch and Brannon caution us that the ability to revise, to

> recover additional options requires an intellectual discipline and a rhetorical awareness that beginning writers frequently lack . . . writers with underdeveloped verbal skills will have all the more difficulty conceiving what else might be said when herculean effort may already have been required to say anything at all. (1981, p. 3)

In one class recently, while poet-consultant Peter Vandenberg was reading a story by a fifth-grader who said he was finished, the student suddenly grabbed the paper back, announcing that he had "read it" to some of his classmates but had forgotten to take it to an editing group. It was immediately clear that the student had internalized a linear prescription of **the** writing process without understanding his

own process. It is invariably more important to stop a student and talk about **why** one might read out-loud or edit than to simply send him off to the "right" group.

Keystone Project administrators and teachers must consistently remind each other and their students that a collaborative, student-centered, process-centered approach to writing instruction can facilitate improvement in student writing only to the extent that it avoids being reified into prescription. The teacher who believes that writers should follow a linear series of steps in a process, without regard to how those steps can interrelate and complement each other, privileges one conception of process over another. That may leave some students with just one more set of prescriptions rather than a way to inquire into their own inventive strategies. Knoblauch and Brannon suggest that in order to address the complicated notion of writing as process, teachers should adopt a pedagogy that reflects

> a concern for actively educating students, perhaps through short, acclimating exercises, about what rewriting involves (and how it is different from editing), what it can accomplish, and how it can be done . . . [and] a concern for supporting revision insuring that students understand what comments mean, by discussing possible changes and additions before rewriting begins, and by reviewing completed revisions, perhaps in conference, to see what they have achieved. (1981, p. 3)

As recently as 1989, Reither and Vipond suggested that the "revolution in composition theory . . . seems to have been confined pretty much to the literature [resulting in] little substantive change in either course design or classroom practice" (p. 855). However, the institutional reform that is underway in the Fort Worth ISD through the Keystone Project's staff development and writing programs implements practical application of recent social construction theory for the teaching of writing. Soon a body of students will be entering the secondary schools nurtured in a collaborative, non-threatening writing environment. In order for these students to continue exploring their own writing processes as a part of formal education, the Keystone Project must seek acceptance at the secondary level, where Hampton says there is the most resistance. With a fifty percent teacher turnover rate, Hampton suggests that the efforts of this one private foundation with only nine full-time staff members may not be able to keep up through in-service training.

In failing to separate rhetorical aims from prescriptive grammar, departments of education at American universities continue to privilege product over process. Until they encourage prospective teachers and administrators to foster writing instruction as opposed to spelling and punctuation drills, to provide assignments that ask students to take an active part in learning rather than accept the passive receiver role, the Keystone Project will remain the exception, not the rule.

Notes

1 Hampton prefers the term **consultant** for its rhetorical advantages when presenting this staff development idea to building principals and occasionally reluctant teachers. She acknowledges, however, that it is primarily a term dictated by payroll concerns.

2 By allowing students to make choices about what goes into the "writing folder" that will follow them through their years in the FWISD, conferences enable students to enter their evaluation process by determining the worth of their writing and the extent of their own capabilities.

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